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Press Release
2006-08

September 14, 2006

U.S. – FRANCE COOPERATION ON CHIKUNGUNYA VACCINE

French investigators will soon evaluate an experimental vaccine developed by the U.S. Department of Defense as a potential solution for the protection of residents of La Réunion Island, an Overseas Department of France in the Indian Ocean, and elsewhere from an outbreak of Chikungunya virus.

Flu-like illness caused by the mosquito-borne Chikungunya virus has become a serious health problem on La Réunion Island and in nearby locations. Since December 2005, more than 200,000 people, of the 800,000 who live on the island, have contracted the viral illness and 246 have died.

U.S. Army scientists studied Chikungunya virus for many years, because it was considered both a naturally occurring infectious disease threat to deploying soldiers and a potential biological warfare threat. It is commonly seen in Africa and Asia. Scientists at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases developed a candidate vaccine in the 1980's. An initial safety test indicated the vaccine candidate was safe in humans, but the Army discontinued development in the 1990's, when other infectious-disease research and development efforts received higher priority for limited funding.

In response to the recent outbreak in La Réunion Island, a consortium of the French Ministry of Health, the Institut Pasteur, the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm) with the technical assistance of Sanofi Pasteur, a private-sector pharmaceutical company, working in partnership with the U.S. Military Infectious Diseases Research Program and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is resuming the testing and development of the Chikungunya vaccine. On September 6, 2006, Commanding General Eric B. Schoomaker, MG, MC, of the U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command signed a Material Transfer Agreement with Inserm Transfert, Inserm's technology-transfer organization, to allow the transfer of records of previous clinical studies, supplies of the vaccine and seed stock from which it is made.

Inserm will coordinate further development of the vaccine, including the preparation for a clinical trial on La Réunion Island. This clinical trial will be an important test of the vaccine's efficacy in protecting people from the Chikungunya virus.